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New York

THEATRE CRITICS'

Reviews

1943

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THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Theater Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

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"Kiss and Tell"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
March 18, 1943

George Abbott Whips Up a Winner

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

GEORGE ABBOTT is back in the groove again with a gay and funny farce-comedy about young things and soldiers, and the impact of both on well-run middle-class homes. *Kiss and Tell* belongs, I suppose, to the same school as *Janie;* but it offers a far livelier curriculum and far less inhibited pupils. Mr. Herbert has pivoted his farce on the stork, and a very unwelcome stork at that; but he has kept things blithefully innocent by having the bird in hand all the time.

* * *

The plot has to do with the soldier son and the young daughter of some Main St. Montagues and Capulets. In view of the feud, Lenny and Mildred get married secretly before he goes overseas. In due time Mildred finds she is going to have a baby, and—being afraid to tell her family about the marriage—takes Lenny's 16-year-old sister wth her to the obstetrician. The kid sister is seen emerging from his office, and because she is pledged to secrecy about the young couple, lets her family think it is she who is in trouble. She even gets the young good next door to pose as her seducer; and from there on, *Kiss and Tell* plays the situation for all it is worth.

* * *

Fortunately, it plays it with enough real humor and enough funny lines to redeem a pretty ticklish subject and renovates a pretty trite set-up. The genuine freshness of Mr. Herbert's dialogue is, indeed, what gives a special lift to all of *Kiss and Tell,* for its materials are ready-to-wear rather than made-to-order. There is the apoplectic paterfamilias, the highly precocious and polysyllabic small boy, the movie-minded junior miss trying to act grown up, the noisy, awkward youth forever shouting "Holy Cow"—the whole Tarkington legacy. At times these people slump into stock characterizations, but on the whole Mr. Herbert has taken the trouble to fill them in, and has given them funny as well as familiar things to do and say. Mr. Abbott, on his side, has paced things to a turn, stuck in a lot of helpful business, and whipped up the farce situation with his special patented egg-beater.

* * *

The cast is uniformly good, Jessie Royce Landis and Robert Keith made a fine pair of parents. Joan Caulfield is attractive and winning as the junior miss, and Judith Parrish pleasant as the young bride. Richard Widmark makes a likable young bridegroom and Robert White an amusing "seducer," while Tommy Lewis plays the small boy with delightful relish. Mr. Root's back porch set is serviceable and attractive.

NEW YORK SUN
March 18, 1943

'Kiss and Tell,' New Farce, Is Presented at the Biltmore by George Abbott

By WARD MOREHOUSE

GEORGE ABBOTT, man of the theater from upstate, has again turned to his favorite subject, adolescence, and this time in an amusing, frantic and noisy farce called "Kiss and Tell." He brought it last evening into the Biltmore, a playhouse which has served him well on several previous occasions.

Mr. Abbott is a showman who leaves Chekhov to such neighbors as he now has just to the east of him in Forty-seventh street. He doesn't fuss with war plays; he isn't particularly concerned with historical drama. But give him a script about the problems of youth, and particularly one of sex in a suburban setting, and he goes to town.

His plays of the juveniles and their ways, of the precocity of 15-year-olds, have not always appealed to me as required theater-going, but they seem to have a wide audience. Now and then they settle down for little runs of 500 to 600 times.

Anyway, into "Kiss and Tell" the author, F. Hugh Herbert, aided by Mr. Abbott's experienced direction, has packed family feuds, back-porch wooing, a secret marriage, expectant motherhood, fist fights, bloody noses, roaring parents and all attendant misunderstandings and complications. It's all done in the skillful Abbott tradition and according to the approved Abbott formula.

There is a lot of funny stuff in "Kiss and Tell," particularly in the second act, and the cast does well by the author and producer. Joan Caulfield is a pretty and agreeable heroine and there are good performances by young Tommy Lewis, Robert White and Judith Parrish. In the roles of the adults you have such well-known players as Jessie Royce Landis, Robert Keith and Calvin Thomas.

Miss Landis hasn't yet found the role that she is seeking, and deserves, but she does what she can with the part of Mrs. Archer. Robert Keith is enormously amusing as her explosive husband. The players also include Lulu Mae Hubbard, returning to Broadway after an absence of some seasons, and James Lane, who used to be in all the old John Golden hits and who is now an Abbott standby.

The Biltmore Theater, in its eighteen years, has often been shaken with laughter. Certainly during the tenancy of other Abbott pieces, including "Brother Rat" and "The Primrose Path." And, to complete this report, I must say that last evening's audience laughed loud and hard. The most responsive spectator I've encountered in endless years of playgoing was the occupant of an adjoining seat, B 106. Whoever B 106 may be, he had a better time than anybody I've seen in a playhouse since "Up in Mabel's Room" played in 42d street.

That one wasn't about adolescence, but it was also funny.

NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN
March 18, 1943

George Abbott Presents Gay Comedy Based on the Archer Family Sketches

By JOHN ANDERSON

LOUD laughs and many of them shook whatever the Biltmore Theatre uses for rafters last night when George Abbott presented a fresh, funny and completely beguiling comedy about a small town junior miss—a comedy written by F. Hugh Herbert and called "Kiss and Tell." It is hilariously acted by an excellent cast, with all the old-time Abbott brilliance of comic direction. The First Nighters couldn't have been happier if they had written it themselves.

Mr. Herbert has based his comedy on the Archer family sketches, written for Good Housekeeping Magazine, and his central character is, of course, Corliss Archer, a young lady going on 16, whose adolescent behavior leaves the family about as jittery as it would feel with a time bomb in the cellar, and no clock to go by.

Though there is never any telling what Miss Corliss is likely to do, Mr. Herbert tells it with much gusto and good humor, and he has taken the trouble to surround her with amusing characters and to whip up a fine domestic delirium. The delirium spreads next door to the Franklins, and down the block to the Pringles' place.

Family Feud

For Mr. Herbert knows enough about "Romeo and Juliet" to know that nothing improves a love story so much as a little family feuding, whether it concerns the star-crossed lovers of Verona, or the comic valentines of the unidentified small town where Corliss Archer lives and has her dizzy being.

The trouble at the Biltmore is that the Archers and the Pringles aren't speaking, and that Mildred Pringle is not only Corliss' dearest friend, but the sweetheart, and later the secret wife of Lt. Lenny Archer. It is a marriage which Corliss has sworn in blood never to reveal until the family feud is settled, so when the Pringles declare that Corliss is a tramp, and say that she is about to have a baby, she accepts the indictment, and quietly involves poor Dexter Franklin, a neighboring droop. Happily, a cable saying that Lt. Lenny has been decorated for bringing down German planes in Africa clears up the whole thing and everybody is happy except poor Dexter, who has a "going on seventeen" hankering to marry Corliss anyway.

Naturally it is not the story itself so much as the frantic details that Mr. Herbert uses to keep his stage spinning on its funny-bone. He makes wonderful use of Mildred's pudgy little brother as a sort of super-spy on the two households, and achieves hilarious results by giving him the bored vocabulary of an ambassador and the executive ability of a field marshal, qualities blissfully blended in the benign performance of Master Tommy Lewis.

Excellent Acting

But the others are as shrewdly and as comically written, and as well played. Corliss herself is acted with great charm and understanding by Joan Caulfield, and droopy Dexter, whose conversation consists largely of the exclamation "Holy Cow" is perfectly done by Robert White.

The distracted parents are more than the usual stiff stooges for adolescent comedy and some of the best scenes belong to the older folks. It is then that Jessie Royce Landis and Robert Keith as Corliss' parents take over and give the stage the speed and precision of first-rate comic playing. The others are all helpful, especially Paula Trueman, Richard Widmark, Frances Bavier and James Lane, the last as a disillusioned house-painter who opens the play and gets away just before hell breaks loose. John Root's setting seems practically perfect—so what more do you want?

"Kiss and Tell"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
March 18, 1943

'Kiss and Tell' Is a Comedy Hit That Brightens Broadway List

"Kiss and Tell," comedy by F. Hugh Herbert. Produced by George Abbott at the Mansfield Theatre, New York, March 17, 1943.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

YOU will not have to worry much about this one, unless you put off seat buying too long. "Kiss and Tell," at the Mansfield, is one of those comparatively rare comedy hits that is pretty sure to suit the whole family and simply slay visiting relatives and prospective selectees.

It has the best of all light comedy foundations, which is that of plausibility. A bit stretched, perhaps, but a legitimate plausibility none the less.

It has the second best of all light comedy foundations, which is that of reasonably developed situations. And a third definite asset in its believable characters, intelligently cast.

Sounds simple, but if you had seen playwrights and play producers throw as many good comedy possibilities away as has your correspondent, you would know just how satisfying is his enthusiasm of the moment.

Family Feud

"Kiss and Tell" is the story of a neighborhood feud fed by familiar developments. The Archers and the Pringles have quarrelled because Mrs. Archer is alleged to have intimated that Mildred Pringle is a little tramp.

While the feud is simmering, Lieut. Lenny Archer arrives home on a 72-hour furlough and induces Mildred Pringle to elope with him. When they are married they swear Lenny's younger sister, Corliss, to secrecy, with one of those hope-to-die-and-turn-all-black oaths which simply can't be broken.

Naturally, when Mrs. Pringle sees Corliss coming out of the office of an obstetrician, after she has been known to have been flirting with Dexter Franklin, who is 17 and frightfully impetuous, it would be just like her to demand, cattily, whose daughter is a tramp now?

Pretty tough on the Archers. They take it with a proper farcical explosiveness, restrained by a decent family pride.

There is some repetition of humorous leads and situations. Old Master Abbott, who had rather toy with laugh building than any other division of stage direction, is loathe to let one laugh cover any situation from which he can wangle two or three.

But he has been awfully wise, it seems to me, in letting the complications of "Kiss and Tell" develop slowly and along quite familiar lines. The cumulative effect is consistent, and makes of the last act a continuously happy finale to the evening's fun.

Good Cast

The cast and the direction are both a great help. Adolescent youngsters who come closer to acting their age than most stage adolescents do, are splendidly played by Joan Caulfield and Robert White.

The chubby and precocious Tommy Lewis (you'll remember him as the small boy of "Borrowed Time") is again amazingly poised and amusing as a pestiferous younger brother. Pretty and talented Judith Parrish plays nicely as the unsuspected bride, and there are two nice, new juveniles in Richard Widmark and John Harvey.

Of the adult anchors, Jessie Royce Landis is the understanding mother and Robert Keith the lightly over-explosive but highly amusing outraged father. Calvin Thomas, Lulu Mae Hubbard, Frances Bavier and Paula Trueman fit in nicely.

John Root did the attractive interior. The record credits F. Hugh Herbert with but one other play to reach these precincts. That was a vociferous something called "On the Quiet," produced two years ago at the Guild Theatre, with Henry Duffy as a sponsor. Last night's audience was very happy.

'KISS AND TELL'

Play by F. Hugh Herbert; produced and staged by George Abbott; setting by John Root; presented Wednesday, March 17, 1943, at the Biltmore Theater. The cast:

Mr. Willard	James Lane
Louise	Frances Bavier
Corliss Archer	Joan Caulfield
Raymond Pringle	Tommy Lewis
Mildred Pringle	Judith Parrish
Dexter Franklin	Robert White
Janet Archer	Jessie Royce Landis
Harry Archer	Robert Keith
Private Earhart	John Harvey
Lieut. Lenny Archer	Richard Widmark
Mary Franklin	Paula Trueman
Bill Franklin	Calvin Thomas
Dorothy Pringle	Lulu Mae Hubbard
Uncle George	Walter Davis
Robert Pringle	Robert Lynn

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
March 18, 1943

Kiss and Tell Opens At Biltmore Theater

By BURTON RASCOE

KISS AND TELL, a comedy by F. Hugh Herbert, which was presented with joyous gusto by George Abbott at the Biltmore last night, is just the medicine—as palatable as old brandy and Benedictine—for the mopes, melancholia and incipient manic depressive psychosis. Or even if you are in the best of health and spirits. I have rarely laughed so hard or so nearly continuously as I did last night from the moment Robert Keith made his ridiculous entrance at the opening of the second scene of the first act on through, barring intermissions, to the end of the play.

If the Ides of March have left you any spending money at all you might as well start trying to make your reservations for Kiss and Tell now, for this is one of those delights you are going to feel embarrassed to confess you haven't experienced when your friends are all talking about it, as I predict they will be shortly.

* * *

A Different Suburban Drama

It is a suburban drama with a difference. In it two neighboring families who have been lifelong friends have been precipitated into a feud, which grows progressively violent, over the excessive pride the two mothers have in the blameless characters of their respective daughters, one 18 and the other 16. Mrs. Archer (played by Jessie Royce Landis) has forbidden her daughter (played by Joan Caulfield) to associate with the 18-year-old Pringle girl (played by Judith Parrish) following an episode in which she learned that the two girls had sold kisses for the USO fund at a dollar apiece, whereas they had reported they had sold embroidered towels. Mrs. Archer deemed the Pringle girl a bad influence upon her daughter, which naturally didn't set well with the prideful Mrs. Pringle (played by Lulu Mae Hubbard).

The Archer child is at that period in a healthy and attractive girl's life when she is known as "boy crazy" and when she is, actually, not boy crazy but so anxious to grow up that she is a bit dippy about anything in pants so long as the pants wearer is old enough to be considered (by her) adult and experienced. The Archers' son, a flight lieutenant who is in love with the Pringle girl, comes home on a brief leave to find that his parents and his sweetheart's parents aren't speaking to each other. He thinks both parents are childish and persuades the Pringle girl to marry him clandestinely before he is sent overseas.

Meanwhile the Messrs. Archer and Pringle (played by Robert Keith and Robert Lynn) have had their emotions whipped up by the two women until they had to have it out in a fist fight. The fight takes place while the curtain is lowered on the first scene. When the curtain goes up Mr. Archer bursts in, quivering and incoherent with rage and looking as though he has been put through a sausage grinder. While the family tries to administer first aid, you learn from Mr. Archer the provocation and the details of the fight. And, at one point, the Pringle quiz kid drops in to tell Mr. Archer that, if it is any satisfaction to him, his pop is in worse shape than he is.

* * *

A Lesson for Parents

Thereafter there is a little matter of why the Archer girl has been visiting an obstetrician, a fact reported to Mrs. Archer with triumphant malice by Mrs. Pringle. This is an illusion-shattering blow to the Archers. Through two other extremely amusing scenes they are allowed by their daughter to believe the worst about her because of a secret promise she has made to a neighbor boy to keep a secret and has sealed that promise with her blood. It is unfair to reveal the plot beyond this point even if the audience is let in on the secret. Suffice to say this much ado about nothing is managed by the author with a maximum of ingenuity and serio-comic effects.

Don't look for anything more profound in this play than that of a portrayal of parents who forget they were once young and who have at once too much and too little faith in their offspring—parents who are pretty childish-minded themselves and who are guilty of excessive petty pride. The fun is all in the incidents and characterizations, which are adroit, resourceful and intelligent.

Miss Landis has a less important part than she is accustomed to carrying, but it is an appealing part to which she gives her usual finely modulated sense of character. Mr. Keith as the ludicrously incensed paterfamilias has the juiciest adult role in the play and sustains it faultlessly. Joan Caulfield, whose features you have seen on magazine covers, is as natural and endearing an adolescent as she is as an artist's model. Tommy Lewis as the unbearable prodigy has the fattest part of all, because not only is he the complicator but also the commentator on and unraveler of the proceedings, and he is given many clever lines. He was, I think, a little too forward at times, as though he were too confident that he was stealing the scenes. Richard Widmark is a welcome recruit to the fast-dwindling supply of good juveniles; this is his first Broadway appearance. Lulu Mae Hubbard has one brief bit which she makes memorable. Frances Bavier lent a homey touch to the role of the independent Archer cook; Robert White as the adolescent eager to grow up, always seemed to me to overplay a trifle, but he was acceptable, and the others rounded out a well-balanced cast. This is a George Abbott production of the best in tempo and timing and all the other desirabilities that label carries. The setting by John Root is all it should be. . . . Put this comedy on your preferred list, near the top, and mark it must.